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Thursday, 25 January 2007, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Churkin	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Congo	Mr. Gayama
	France	Mr. Lacroix
	Ghana	Nana Effah-Apenteng
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	Peru	Mr. Voto-Bernales
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Bader
	Slovakia	Mr. Burian
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Emyr Jones Parry
	United States of America	Mr. Wolff

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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07-22082 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Russian*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. I give the floor to Mr. Gambari.

Mr. Gambari: The former Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, presented his final report on this subject (S/2006/956) to the Council in early December. This briefing will cover events that have occurred since then, in a period of heightened levels of instability and suffering combined with a renewed sense of international urgency to find a political way ahead, as evidenced by the visits of Secretary Condoleezza Rice and High Representative Javier Solana to the region, the proposed meeting of the Quartet on 2 February in Washington, D.C., and a possible early tripartite meeting of President Abbas, Prime Minister Olmert and Secretary Rice. I am also encouraged by reports that Foreign Minister Livni will soon be meeting President Abbas in Davos. The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have also been engaged in the search for a renewed and credible dialogue towards the resolution of this intractable conflict.

Both President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert have been working hard to try to ease tensions and move towards a resumption of political dialogue. The ceasefire agreed to at the end of November in Gaza remains in place, although, according to Israeli officials, militants have fired more than 104 rockets into southern Israel during the past two months. In the face of those attacks, the Israeli Government has, to its credit, shown considerable restraint. Despite its flaws, the ceasefire has significantly reduced violence, and we encourage the parties to try to build on it.

The ceasefire has not, however, been extended to the West Bank. Indeed, operations to arrest or kill wanted Palestinians continue on a regular basis in West Bank population centres, as evidenced by the Israel Defense Forces raid on Ramallah on 4 January, in which 5 Palestinians were killed and 35 were injured. During the reporting period, 28 Palestinians were killed and over 130 were injured in Israeli military operations, while 10 Israelis were injured by Palestinian militants.

Efforts led by Egypt are continuing on an arrangement to secure the release the Israeli corporal captured last summer and of Palestinian prisoners in Israel, but so far these have not yielded results.

Nevertheless, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert met on 23 December in Jerusalem. They agreed to revive the joint committees established in the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings and to resume the work of the quadripartite security committee between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt and the United States. Prime Minister Olmert also undertook to transfer to the Office of President Abbas $100 million of the more than half a billion dollars of Palestinian clearance revenues being withheld by Israel. He also agreed to intensity efforts to upgrade the crossings between the Gaza Strip and Israel, to ease procedures at a number of checkpoints in the West Bank and to remove a number of roadblocks.

Implementation of those understandings is proceeding slowly. Israel has in the past few days transferred the $100 million. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported a modest easing in the operation of a few West Bank checkpoints, but the anticipated removal of the roadblocks has yet to materialize.

Access and movement need to be improved. During the first 16 days of 2007, average exports out of Karni stood at approximately 46 trucks a day. This represents an improving trend, but still reflects only 11 per cent of the Agreement on Movement and Access target of 400 per day. We encourage further progress on that front. During the same period, Rafah was opened, primarily for pilgrims, for just 32 per cent of the scheduled opening hours. Finally, there has been no

discernable improvement in movement for Palestinians in the West Bank. According to OCHA, the number of barriers currently on the ground — 527 — represents a 25 per cent increase over the course of 2006.

The Government of Israel approved the repopulation of a settlement deep in the Jordan Valley by 30 families evacuated from Gaza in 2005; such a relocation is in violation of the Road Map. The decision was put on hold after international protests, but settlement activity continues. According to official Israeli figures, the number of West Bank settlers, excluding those in East Jerusalem, has increased by nearly 6 per cent since 2005. Moreover, the Government's pledges to remove outposts remain unfulfilled, and the construction of the barrier on the occupied Palestinian territory continues, despite the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

It is important, by way of context, to note that the evolving Israeli-Palestinian dialogue is complicated by the internal political situation both in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Israel.

In the occupied Palestinian territories, the pendulum has swung between worsening civil conflict and renewed efforts to forge national unity. Factional tension rose to acute levels in mid-December and again in early January. Deplorable incidents included the killing of three children as they were being taken to school; a shoot-out between gunmen at the Rafah terminal as Prime Minister Haniyeh returned from a regional tour; and a siege at the home of an official in Gaza, which resulted in the killing of the official and several others. In total, 43 people were killed in Palestinian-on-Palestinian internal conflict during the reporting period, nearly double the number killed by Israeli military operations.

Internal violence has been accompanied by heightened negative political rhetoric and threats and the strengthening of factional forces. President Abbas announced that the Hamas-affiliated special executive force, under the Ministry of the Interior, is illegal unless immediately integrated into existing security services. Tensions also flared in late December. The President called for early presidential and parliamentary elections unless agreement could be reached on a national unity government. Nevertheless, each time factional fighting has threatened to spin out of control, President Abbas and Prime Minister Haniyeh have managed to reach understandings to de-escalate the tensions, which is a positive development.

Efforts to form a Palestinian national unity government have resumed, involving dialogue in Gaza as well as in Damascus. It appears that the main issues of disagreement are over control of the Ministry of the Interior and the strength of the language concerning the commitment to Arab and international resolutions. It should also be noted that, while refusing to countenance recognition of Israel, exiled Hamas leader Khaled Mashal recently told news outlets that Israel's existence was a reality and that, with the formation of a Palestinian State within the 4 June 1967 borders, "there will remain a State called Israel; this is a matter of fact".

President Abbas recently met Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in Damascus and subsequently met Khaled Mashal. A joint statement was issued after the meeting with Mashal, stating that progress had been made towards the formation of a national unity government and calling for an end to internal fighting. The statement also rejected the concept of an interim Palestinian State with provisional borders. President Abbas subsequently reaffirmed that early elections remain on the table if a national unity government is not formed.

Turning to Israeli political developments, a number of political scandals and other developments have underscored the difficulties that the coalition Government is facing in forging and implementing a clear agenda. The Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Dan Halutz, resigned, and an official inquiry into the conduct of last summer's war with Hizbollah is continuing. The campaign for Chairman of the Labour Party — the junior coalition partner — is under way in preparation for primaries in May. Several senior ministers have publicly discussed their views and plans on how to carry forward the political process. This has highlighted both growing Israeli interest in addressing the conflict through negotiations and internal divisions over precisely how to do so.

I am pleased, however, to report that regional and international leaders have intensified their engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. There have been consultations among a number of countries in the region, including President Mubarak's meeting with Prime Minister Olmert on 4 January.

The fifteenth anniversary of the 1991 Madrid Conference was marked by a conference sponsored by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in which prominent regional and international personalities and senior European and United Nations officials participated. They discussed options for trying to bring about progress towards a permanent status agreement and a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace.

As I mentioned earlier, United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently visited the region and announced that she would soon bring Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas together to discuss "the political horizon". She expressed her commitment to addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the importance of a revitalized Quartet. The European Union High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana, also visited the region last week, as I mentioned earlier. The Secretary-General will attend a Quartet principals meeting on 2 February in Washington, D.C., and Quartet envoys met yesterday in Paris. The Government of Syria has publicly called in recent months for a resumption of negotiations with Israel. I should add that, on 16 January, the Israeli press published understandings for a peace agreement between Israel and Syria, which were supposedly arrived at through a private initiative. The Governments of Israel and Syria have strongly denied any official connection with that initiative.

Concerning aid and the socio-economic situation, I wish to mention that it is exactly a year today since Palestinian legislative elections brought the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority Government to power, leading to a reassessment of donor programmes and the cessation of financial transfers by Israel. It should be noted, however, that international aid to the Palestinians has actually increased; what is different is that aid is mostly bypassing the Palestinian Government.

In the past year, the International Monetary Fund estimates that donors provided over $700 million in budget support. Over half of this came from Arab League member States through direct contributions to the Office of the President. The remainder was mainly provided by Western donors through the temporary international mechanism (TIM) and bilateral donations. The TIM, designed to provide emergency support to social sectors, is currently in its seventh month and has so far disbursed $266 million. The international community channelled a further $450 million, equivalent to approximately 11 per cent of Palestinian gross domestic product (GDP), in life-sustaining humanitarian programmes to Palestinians through United Nations agencies and NGOs.

The total assistance to Palestinians last year, not including funds channelled to the Palestinian Authority Government or Hamas by regional donors, reached around $1.2 billion. That is nearly a 10 per cent increase in aid over 2005. Humanitarian assistance alone doubled since 2004, taking mainly the form of food aid and cash-for-work programmes. However, real GDP per capita declined by at least 8 per cent in the past year. Poverty levels increased by 30 per cent. Public institutions that we in the international community built up have been severely weakened by a lack of operational funds, energy shortages and military damage.

The worsening situation on the ground underscores the limits of what international assistance can accomplish. Without greater freedom of access and movement and without the political process that is carrying the parties towards a two-State solution, the most that aid can do is to contain, for a limited time, the spread of grievances and the spread of instability. The experience of the past year shows that this type of investment brings rapidly diminishing returns.

Turning to Lebanon, the Secretary-General is today attending the Paris III conference, where he will be reiterating the strong support of the United Nations for Lebanon and urging redoubled efforts by all sides to return to dialogue and to break the paralysing political impasse.

The demonstrations that began in Beirut on 1 December 2006 had largely been peaceful until last Tuesday, 23 January. Following a call from the opposition for a general strike, thousands of Lebanese from opposing political factions faced each other, often violently, on the streets. Few regions of the country were spared by the unrest that led to at least 3 dead and over 100 injured, some very seriously. Major roads throughout the country, and in particular in Beirut and its airport, were effectively blocked by burning tires and earth barriers. A tense calm returned to Beirut yesterday following the decision by the opposition to suspend the strike, but tensions remain high. However, the opposition has stated that further escalation will occur unless the Government accedes to its demands.

The events of 23 January showed how easily political tensions can spill over into violence. We are

greatly concerned regarding those risks and the effect they have on the stability and security of Lebanon, which all sides state they wish to maintain. We remain in contact with all parties, we encourage an early return to dialogue and we support the continuing efforts, including the efforts of the Arab League and its Secretary-General, Amre Moussa, to bring the leaders to compromise and consensus.

General stability has returned to southern Lebanon due to the deployment of the enhanced United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Lebanese Armed Forces, which continue to have a high level of cooperation. The Lebanese army is now playing a crucial role in the south, as well as in Beirut and other parts of the country, including Lebanon's eastern and northern borders. This makes it even more important that the support promised to the army by the international community be delivered, and delivered in a timely manner.

UNIFIL continues to maintain good relations with the Israel Defense Forces. However, Israeli air violations of Lebanese airspace continue. That damages the credibility of both UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces. We again urge Israel to cease those violations.

Civilians continue to be killed and injured by the cluster munitions dropped on Lebanon during last year's conflict. During the month of December, incidents led to the death of 3 people and the injury of 21 others, including 5 children and 2 Belgian peacekeepers. The United Nations is continuing its programme to identify and remove unexploded ordnance in southern Lebanon. As of today, at least 840 individual cluster strike locations have been identified, with each strike location containing up to hundreds of individual bomblets or sub-munitions.

The Secretary-General has designated Major-General Claudio Graziano of Italy as UNIFIL Force Commander to succeed Major-General Alain Pellegrini. The handover ceremony is scheduled to take place on 2 February 2007.

In conclusion, I wish to observe that none of us in this Chamber, outside of it or worldwide can afford another year like the last one that we witnessed in Lebanon and the Middle East. Therefore, we believe strongly that a resumed political process between Israel and the Palestinians is a clear priority. The Secretary-General encourages the two leaders to build on their progress to date by implementing agreements and by starting to address the fundamental issues of the conflict.

Solutions are urgently needed to the political impasses both among the Palestinians and in Lebanon. The Secretary-General encourages leaders in both contexts to overcome their differences and to find a way to move forward that serves the best interests of their respective peoples. Lebanon, as its people know all too well, can ill afford any further deterioration in the situation. For many Lebanese, ugly spectres of the past have again begun to emerge. All sides have a shared responsibility, in our view, to resolve their political differences through the democratic process and in a peaceful manner, in order to spare their respective populations further anxiety, further insecurity and further turmoil.

Prospects for a wider regional dialogue must also be cautiously monitored and the door should remain open to discussions that may lead to wider regional and comprehensive peace. The Secretary-General has discussed with many interlocutors both the opportunities that now exist to make genuine strides towards peace and the very real obstacles that must be overcome. He considers next week's meeting of the Quartet to be an important opportunity to chart a way forward for re-energizing the peace process and implementing all relevant Security Council resolutions.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Mr. Gambari for his briefing.

The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda. In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.